

Images from *The Last American Hero*



The title sequence begins with a rural graveyard. We hear the sound of a muscle car roaring through the hills and the speeding vehicle then appears. Junior is introduced as the driver as he returns home through the Appalachian hill country and the theme song, Jim Croce's "I Got A Name" runs through it. The now-familiar song was first released on the film before the rising singer's death in an accident and the song was subsequently released on record shortly after, becoming Croce's signature song. The lyrics evoke pride in family and identity while "moving on down the highway." It serves as an "internal song": developed within Hollywood film in the 1967-73 era to express a character's inner thoughts without the actor actually singing [Todd Berliner and Philip Furia. "The Sounds of Silence: Songs in Hollywood Films since the 1960s." *Style* 36.1 (2002): 19-35.]. It recurs throughout the film during narrative transitions of Junior's progress.



Returning home, Junior joins his father and younger brother at the moonshine still as they fill plastic jugs with today's output and load up his car to run the illegal output past the local and federal police. The still is a family operation, and Junior's unique talent in fast and evasive driving is established as he foils the police, their roadblocks and pursuit.

Contemporary working class film heroes in *Evel Knievel* and *The Last American Hero*

by [Chuck Kleinhans](#)

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Preface: 2017

When I first published this essay in the second issue of JUMP CUT in 1974, it helped mark out the editors' answer to "what is to be done?" in left film studies. First, it directly addressed the representation of the working class and the working class audience for film in the United States at the time. These were the kind of films that other publications and other intellectuals usually ignored, or sometimes recognized only to dismiss. At that point intellectual liberals could, at best, make a "working class hero" out to be someone like the Jack Nicholson character in *Five Easy Pieces* (d. Bob Rafelson, 1970), introduced as an oil field worker who has dropped out of his privileged upper class family and never fulfilled his promise as a child prodigy pianist. That film remains famous for the "chicken salad sandwich" scene where Nicholson's character humiliates a waitress who is required to follow a rule to provide only what is printed on the menu. [Interestingly enough, the location is a Denny's chain restaurant in my now hometown of Eugene, Oregon, right off of I-5.]

Those of us starting up JUMP CUT were critical of Hollywood's production of films that served ideological conformity, but we also recognized that mainstream cinema spoke to the fantasies, desires, and needs of ordinary people. To simply offer a negative critique of the ideological message (the predominant mode of liberal and left film reviewing at the time) could never answer the question of "why are these films so popular?" The stereotypical liberal and left answer was that the mass audience were dupes, easily swayed by bright shiny things, and incapable of reflective thought: end of story.

We had a different approach. In this case, both of these films present the positive American story of the success myth: the Horatio Alger myth that clean living and hard working will eventually be rewarded with economic and status advancement. (The seldom-noticed flaw in the Alger myth is that while the hero is diligent, it turns out that his reward almost always comes by accident, a fortunate coincidence, not through the direct application of his own efforts. It arrives as if by divine intervention, not self-propelled action.) The appeal to white working class men is clear. Given a certain advantage through white skin privilege and male position in the social hierarchy, they expect to succeed, to rise into a higher class strata and advance economically over their own parents. Taking for granted the existing social order, they tend to think that they should, be paid more and have more of shot at success than women, minorities, and immigrants.

But even back in the 1970s, mainstream sociological and economic studies showed that actually most aspirant white working class guys failed. The most



However Junior's humiliation of the law officers provokes them to blow up the still and jail the father. Junior brings the lawyer to jail, who explains that bribes will give the father better treatment. Junior needs to find a new way to make money.



Determined to make money for his family, Junior aggressively argues with a track owner (Ned Beatty) to be included in a demolition derby. With his buddies he engineers a car with a secret weapon, a metal ram. He finishes third but then demands a chance to return for the next event, a regular stock car race. His inexperience is balanced against his insistent aggressiveness, and he begins rigorous back roads training in his own fast car.



Junior wins his first race, and 8 more at the small track. Meanwhile senior Johnson is sentenced to a year in jail for bootlegging and tells his son to take care of his mother. Following Southern custom, Junior affirms, "Yes, sir," a mark of family bonds and generational respect. We see the mother (Geraldine Fitzgerald) and his brother (Gary Busey) at another race affirming the role of Junior as breadwinner and new paterfamilias.

common pattern was someone accumulating a small amount of capital, and having acquired some trade or craft skills, starting a small business. A gas station was common for someone with auto mechanic abilities, for example. But this same person was often undercapitalized, didn't have the small business skills, couldn't afford new tools as technologies evolved, and couldn't compete with marketplace changes. Losing it all, the chastened worker returned to his previous level, or even fell below it.

A recent celebrity example is provided by "Joe the Plumber," who in a meeting in the 2008 election campaigns asked candidate Barack Obama about small business tax issues. Joe (Samuel Joseph Wurtzelbacher) claimed he was a plumber and wanted to open his own shop. Obama's response, proposing lower taxes for "middle income" earners but higher rates for successful and somewhat larger small businesses, was taken by conservative media as calling for redistribution of wealth and the Republican ticket, John McCain and Sarah Palin, claimed Obama was a socialist. Joe was incorporated into various Republican campaign events, and frequently mentioned as an ordinary aspiring white working class guy in the Midwest who was dismissed by the African American politician and law professor candidate. On further investigation, it turned out that Wurtzelbacher, had a modest income, was in considerable debt and couldn't possibly come up with the capital to start a small plumbing shop. Even more damning, he was not a certified plumber, and he had never been admitted to even a plumbing apprentice program, and he was not qualified to hold a plumbing license in the state of Ohio. In 2014, after failing in the political realm as a candidate for Congress and as a conservative media pundit, Joe began working at a Chrysler Jeep plant, one that had been rescued by Obama's bailout of the auto industry, and joined the United Auto Workers union.

The narrative of the hero's journey always involves trials, tests, and tribulation. But in these two films the protagonist isn't a person of rank, an established leader, an experienced veteran, an accomplished warrior. Rather the film charts the young man of humble origins and limited means who must face a hard-scrabble road to achievement. Relentless determination, hard work, and a certain cocky self-confidence serve to climb the barriers to success. It's easy to see why these heroes appeal to white working class men: they act rather than react, they are not burdened by doubt or self-reflection, and they make do with what they have at hand. Nothing has been given to them: no prestige, no power, no advantages. They make their own futures (or so it seems to them as long as they imagine themselves without any reference to the structural advantages of their race and gender). And there's nothing in these films to raise those questions. Both films are devoid of anyone except white people. And the women who appear in no way compete with the men, but accept their subordinate social and economic status.

Yet the films are not set in a fantasy world in which all will automatically turn out well. The obstacles are built into the real world and have to do with class. Race car driver Junior Jackson has skills with autos, but no capital. Others, race car owners and race track owners, control the means of production. Junior can only sell his labor power and put forward his special skill set to try to get a better deal. Motorcycle daredevil Evel Knievel learns at his first jump that no one in charge will ever look out for him. Thus his skill at self-promotion and entertainment, first learned on the streets in a mining town, is his bulwark. But that skill also constantly spills over into self-aggrandizement, some paranoia, and dreams of defying gravity and physics, as well as challenging the possibilities of surgical medicine.

Both of these heroes are tied to where they come from: for Junior his immediate family, and for Evel his roughneck mining town buddies, but both of the characters separate themselves from the normative expectations of their place of origin. Junior knows he must leave to become a champion racer, a "star," as he describes his future. High school dropout Evel scorns the local sports figures, knowing his destiny will transcend the local horizon. And these are individual paths. Any notion of a collective hero, rising as a group, is absent. You make it on your own. Thus the films' double edge message: the obstacles for working class



Though he wins the race, another driver takes issue with Junior's aggressive driving and a fistfight breaks out at the finish line with a general brawl. The track owner writes the check but tells Junior he can't compete there any more, he's a troublemaker and a hillbilly. Defiant, Junior says he's moving on up to Hickory, a major racing track.



After using the rulebook to get a qualification for the regular NASCAR circuit at Hickory, Junior meets up with a driver who complains about his overbearing owner, Burton Colt. Junior's response is to assert his independence: "If you don't like takin' orders, drive for yourself." But the veteran driver says that's a rookie's naïve delusion.



Alone in a new place, on the cusp of a big career change, the night before the race Junior makes a record in a vending booth at a K-Mart. He talks to his family, and this interesting soliloquy reveals his hopes, fears, and anxieties...even to himself. Cleverly, the scene provides access to the character's inner life in a film that otherwise only depicts character by exterior action. The machine delivers the recording and in reflection, Junior throws it in the trash.

men are clear and present, but overcoming them is a matter of individual effort.

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by Chuck Kleinhans

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- [This version lightly edited and updated.]

"There's room at the top they are telling you still
But first you must learn how to smile as you kill
If you want to be like the folks on the hill
A working class hero is something to be."
—John Lennon

Hollywood's typical presentation of the U.S. success myth has centered on the hero's trials and triumph, considering his class origins only to establish the initial "rags" of the "rags to riches" theme. For example, in *The Benny Goodman Story*, Benny, child of the immigrant slums, receives his first musical instrument and training at Chicago's Hull House, but the remainder of the film resolutely ignores matters of class. Aspiring racial and ethnic minority members of the working class have generally had two career paths held out to them in success-myth films: the entertainment business (e.g., *The Jazz Singer* and *Yankee Doodle Dandy*) and sports (*The Babe Ruth Story* and *Gentleman Jim*). Such films treat the hero's class and racial/ethnic background perfunctorily, unless the topic is inescapable, as with *Jim Thorpe—All American*, which gives a liberal nod recognizing the racism confronting the Native American athlete, and *Your Cheatin' Heart*, which sentimentally traces Hank Williams' career as a country music singer.

Two recent Hollywood success-myth bio films, *Evel Knievel* and *The Last American Hero*, diverge from the traditional direction by presenting heroes whose working class origins are central to the narrative. Doubtless Hollywood's new cultural pluralism—the shift from conceiving of a homogeneous public to making films for well defined audiences (youths, blacks, etc.)—is an economically motivated adjustment to market realities. Significantly, both real-life subjects of these two films attained, and still retain, their celebrity status among a specific audience—the white working class. Motorcycle daredevil Evel Knievel and champion stock car racer Junior Johnson remain little known in the U.S. middle class. These two films depict working class heroes—working class heroes both in the sense that their class origins are not ignored or hidden, and that they are heroes to the working class. For their intended audience these films are "closer to real life" than films depicting middle class protagonists with middle class problems. Yet both films remain within the limits of bourgeois ideology, particularly in dealing with the success myth, for they affirm that individual success is both possible and worth pursuing.

Their distribution indicates that these films are directed at the white working class audience. *The Last American Hero* was released by Fox initially in the summer of 1973 on the drive-in circuit, which is itself a class-distinguished phenomenon providing relatively inexpensive admissions and back-of-the-car free child care. After remarkable success, *The Last American Hero* finally opened in New York City houses without ever having had a critics' screening. *Evel Knievel* achieved a popular initial success and has been a steady second half of double bills at drive-ins for several years. Additionally, it was chosen as a trump card by a major television network to win the prime time ratings battle in the first week of the 73-74 season because of its appeal to Middle America—the majority of TV viewers.



In the race, owner Colt (Ed Lauter) who controls his drivers by radio during the event, yells at his man who reports the car's engine is running too fast. The boss says to just push it. Returning to the track, Colt's car is totaled in a collision.



During the race Junior's aggressive driving pushes him to the front of the pack, but his lead over the favorite turns into a disaster when he pushes the car past its "red line," and the engine blows up. Afterwards, as Junior prepares to haul his damaged car home, Colt arrives having fired his previous driver: "Junior, you've got the talent, but I've got the bankroll."



At the big race, Marge (Valerie Perrine) is with champion driver Kyle Kingman when his wife shows up unexpectedly. The big hair blonde advises Marge to "sell it or sit on it."



Detached from Kingman, Marge invited Junior back to her motel room. After sex she tells the story of how she used to be overweight and was humiliated by frat boys. The pair are both

My discussion of *Evel Knievel* and *The Last American Hero* will describe the films in terms of their presentation of ironic, and sometimes ambiguous, biographies. By specifically looking at several themes in the films—danger and skill, the relation of hero to authority, the role of women, the depiction of class differences, and the action solution to problems—we can better understand the films' appeal.

Success: myth and reality

The media convey information both through form and content. The information conveyed and the way it is presented shape audience sensibility: the question, then, is one of ideology. Modern discussions of ideology begin with Marx's well-known formulation in his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

"It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness."

Obviously Marx's point about the relation between social existence and consciousness cannot be taken in a mechanistic way. In contemporary life, mass culture mediates one's consciousness of social reality, and film is such a mediation. The typical success image in cinema is presented in terms of (1) individuals, who (2) succeed or fail by their own individual activity and outlook. Film thus reinforces tendencies favorable to the status quo by implicitly denying even the possibility of group activity for life's goals or measuring success in political terms.

The success myth is so pervasive in U.S. life that it needs little description: The United States is the land of opportunity, males can go from log cabin to White House, Horatio Alger virtues ensure success. The function of the myth in U.S. life is to encourage aspiration and a belief in individual opportunity. Because of its promise of reward for hard labor, it serves to distract the individual from seeing institutional obstacles to striving, and from considering the small number of wealthy and powerful at the top of the success pyramid in comparison with the massive base of "failures." The myth promises to those who lack money, educational advantages, and influence—the vast majority of Americans—that a personality committed to ambition, determination, perseverance, temperance, and hard work will earn its appropriate reward.

The reality of success and failure in the United States, especially for the working class, is quite at variance with the myth. In one of the best studies of the reality and myth of success among industrial workers, *Automobile Workers and the American Dream*, Ely Chinoy points out that external conditions, not subjective factors determine success for the working class. Soon after beginning a career, the blue collar worker finds a ceiling on his or her upward mobility and level of achievement. Subjectively, when members of the working class find their aspirations impossible to achieve yet accept the prevailing ideology of individualism, the result is self-blame and an elaborate defensive rationalization of their position.

Evel Knievel and *The Last American Hero* are particularly interesting in this context because they do not simply present the standard success myth but deal with it in an ambiguous way by qualifying wholehearted admiration for their respective heroes. In short, they are accommodations of the myth to undeniable reality.

Both *Evel Knievel* and *The Last American Hero* are ironic romances. The traditional romance narrative pattern follows a protagonist through early adventures to a crucial test. The test proves he deserves the title of hero, as with Beowulf, Saint George, and other basic romance protagonists. While both films follow the romance scheme, they also introduce significant irony. Typically a romance clearly distinguishes the hero and heroine, who represent the desirable ideals, from the villains, who embody threats to virtue's triumph. In these films, using an ironic mode, the hero and heroine are tarnished, and they do not simply

outsiders from humble origins, struggling to get ahead in life.

The harsh reality



of capitalism comes home, literally, when his father returns from serving time for bootlegging whiskey. Jackson Sr. destroys the rebuilt still, and declares his sons have to find other ways to make a living that won't put them in prison. Junior has no option but to go to Colt and accept his terms: "My terms are as follows: You'll drive one race for me, when, where, and how I tell you wearing my uniform, for 30% of the prize money, using my car, my equipment, my crew. Yes or no?"



After winning the big race in Colt's car, Junior bargains a somewhat better deal with Colt, finds Marge is now attached to a rival driver, and goes to the winner's press conference. He enters and flash bulbs go off, as the door closes, leaving just a shadow of the Last American Hero, a media image.

oppose the villains, but join the villains in a symbiotic, if distasteful union. For these heroes and heroines, the route to success involves compromise. In *The Last American Hero* this issue of compromise forms a central theme. As a beginning driver, Junior (Jeff Bridges) scorns his rivals who are hired by wealthy patrons. But his pride in his self-made status is shattered when he totals his car, the sum of his assets, in a race. Without the cash or credit to buy a new racing machine, he must become an employee in order to drive, and he makes the distasteful decision to work for the owner he most hates, Burton Colt. Colt tightly controls his employees, treating his drivers callously by using a one-way radio to instruct them in precisely what to do during a race. Once Colt's instructions become too obnoxious, Junior's reaction is to tear the radio apart, but this defiance is permitted only because Junior wins the race.

In *Evel Knievel* the theme of compromise is subdued, for Evel (George Hamilton) constantly defies restrictions. Though he is forced to obey his doctor when immobilized by injuries, once patched up, he escapes to the hospital parking lot where he rides a motorcycle while still in several casts, celebrating his bravado until he comically falls off. Constant reference to his dream of jumping his cycle over the Grand Canyon emphasizes his ambition and his wish to defy the laws of the physical universe. For the most part, compromise is treated in terms of Evel's extreme ambivalence. For example, he fears and scorns the crowds as a mass, who will find his potential or actual injury or death amusing. Yet he performs for them and tells them half-mockingly and half-seriously, "It is truly an honor to risk my life for you." He acts similarly with the press and autograph seekers, first verbally rejecting them and then in fact submitting happily to their attentions. In the film this somewhat schizophrenic behavior seems to pass beyond a normal neurosis allowed a professional daredevil. While in some cases his nervousness is mildly comic (Evel's fear that fans will crush him, tear his clothes off, injure him, as they did to Elvis Presley), Evel resolves everything through action and never exhibits fear in his stunts, while paying the price of never finding repose. When his wife suggests a Mexican vacation to find some quiet, he replies that the water makes you sick.

Evel's retort to his wife indicates another ironic romance element. In the typical romance a temporal and/or spatial place outside of the common world—be that a utopian future following the hero's recognition or an Edenic place in the past or encountered along the journey—allows the relaxed practice of life without threats. Both films, however, adopt an ironic stance and say there is no place or time of innocence. Once involved in the quest the hero cannot return to a simpler life nor attain it when he accomplishes his goal. For Junior and Marge in *The Last American Hero* not even a love tryst is safe, for Marge's former lover and Junior's arch-rival as a driver, Kyle Kingman, enters her place with his own key, which he then graciously leaves when he finds the couple in bed. Once he begins professional driving, Junior cannot go back to his former life in the Appalachian hollows. His father returns from a prison sentence for moonshining and emphatically tells his sons that there will be no more stills on his property, thereby ending Junior's other employable skill. Nor can Junior return to his friends once a winner—a point made visually after he wins the big race. At that point as he climbs the stairs leading to the press room for his post-victory press conference, Junior looks down on the small figures of his old buddies in the darkening dusk. He has just told Colt that they will have to be hired as his pit crew, but the difference between Junior, above, and the friends below on the ground, the growing dark, and the buddies' physical actions, their characteristic "goofing," shows a quantitative and qualitative chasm between the hero and his old companions. As Junior enters the press room he disappears behind the door, but his shadow is silhouetted on the wall in freeze frame. The film ends not with the man, but a two dimensional media image of the winning hero.

Junior cannot go home again, nor can he rest: a season of racing and years of seasons lie ahead. Similarly with Evel Knievel: waiting for his big jump which concludes the film, he paces in a room with wide picture windows looking out on the race track—a constant reminder that there is always a jump coming up, that there is always a quantitative increase in the number of cars he might jump over.

In the typical romance the hero's achievement restores order and virtue. In these films achievement—winning the race or jumping over 19 cars—represents the attainment of hero status, but restores nothing. The film hero's accomplishment proves only bravery and prowess and does not bestow autonomous power, great wealth, or physical well-being. This is a reversal of the traditional romance where winning the crucial battle ensures ascension to the throne or chief-advisor status, gifts of wealth, marriage to the heroine, and the establishment of a new social order promising peace, fertility, and plenitude.

In his book *Blue-Collar Life*, sociologist Arthur B. Shostak argues that the appeal of the typical romance pattern presenting a moral man against the forces of the “outside” fits the blue collar male's disposition to posit a general “us/them” dichotomy in life, with “us” usually seen in terms of the extended family, ethnic group, or neighborhood (the three of which may have considerable overlap). For example, the pattern is prevalent in the western with the villain brought into a serene society, or an element that must be expunged, or the variation with the good guy in a corrupt environment. Some recent action films present the same pattern of a moral man hamstrung by institutions, by “them.” (For an excellent political analysis of *Dirty Harry* along these lines, see Anthony Chase's “The Strange Romance of Dirty Harry...” in *The Velvet Lighttrap*, Jan. 72; reprinted in *Radical America*, 7:1.)

In the case of *Evel Knievel* and *The Last American Hero*, with their ironic romance pattern, we can see that although ironic, the pattern remains intact and is not inverted by the end. In the balance, both Evel and Junior remain “moral” though not pure in their encounters. The outside, “them,” is still suspect: Evel twice states his exaggerated fears that his wife will be “kidnapped, raped, or something” if she goes outside without him, but his obsessive protectiveness is motivated by virtuous concern. Similarly, Junior's first big race on the professional circuit exhibits not only his backwoods ignorance of city ways but also his distance from his fellow drivers who “parade around like movie stars,” as he tells his family. In both films the hero faces the problem of maintaining his native qualities and virtues in a quest for success that involves facing the “outside” and its inherent corruption. The resultant ambiguities in the characters' biographies are seen in several themes, such as that of danger.

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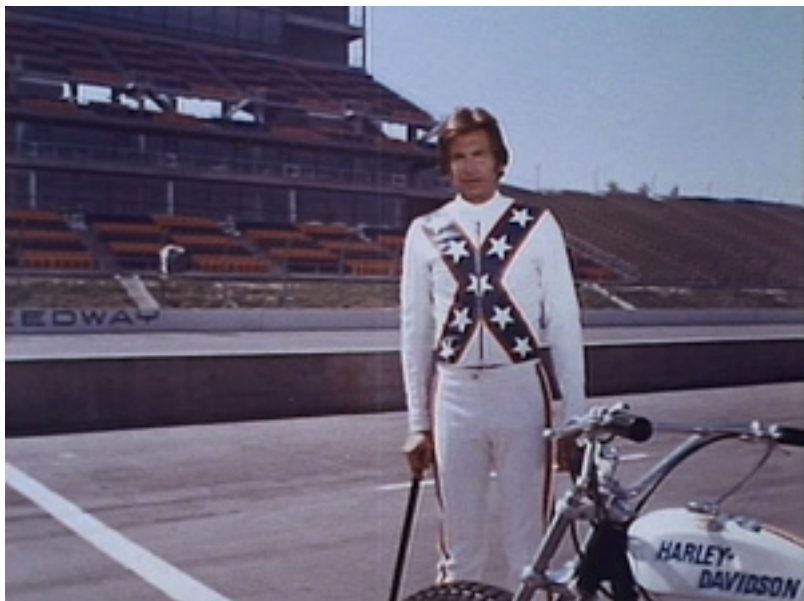
JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from *Evel Knievel*



Early morning at the famous Ontario (California) Motor Speedway. Static shots of the edifice with a trumpet fanfare give way to the arrival of a very loud motorcycle detail in flying wedge formation preceding a limousine with US flags flying. An African American driver gets out, opens the passenger door for Evel Knievel. (This uncredited performer is the only person of color in the film.)



Knievel (George Hamilton) comes forward and directly addresses the camera, announcing that "it is truly an honor to risk my life for you."

Danger and skill

To find excitement in physical danger is a common enough component of our culture. In *The Last American Hero* and *Evel Knievel* the hero's approach to danger is directly related to his nerve, courage, and above all, to his skill. Working within the narrow tolerances of daredevil motorcycle jumping or high speed stock car racing, Junior and Evel must have skill to avoid injury or death. The two biographical films have little need to belabor the point, for their audiences already know it. For both characters survival is a genuine accomplishment at the end of the jump or race. In *Evel Knievel* the point is made principally through the episode of Knievel's jump in Las Vegas where he crashes on descent, a scene vividly shown in slow motion documentary footage of his body as it agonizingly jolts and twists. In *The Last American Hero* the film presents danger by shots of high speed accidents during various races.

According to both films, adolescence is the crucial time in which to teach oneself the technical skills needed for later survival and success. Junior learns high speed driving by running moonshine whiskey past federal tax agents on back roads at night, and Evel's daredevil motorcycle skills come from his considerable teenage experience escaping traffic cops. At this formative stage of the hero's development the central villains are the police, who are portrayed in both films as stupid buffoons. In *Evel Knievel* an early sequence finds Evel in a Butte, Montana, bar where he has a local reputation for creating excitement. Even as a teenager Evel knows how to build crowd expectation, a skill he later uses to good effect in his daredevil performances. After tantalizing his "audience" he proceeds to break into a hardware store across the street. Finding the money locked in a safe, he has the police notified of a burglary in progress. When the cop arrives, Evel volunteers to go in, if given a gun. He re-enters, shoots open the safe, sends the gullible cop off after the "burglar" and, in a Robin Hood gesture, distributes the cash to his audience. In a similar episode, undaunted when he dynamites a wall inside city hall (the wrong wall—he has opened the men's washroom) and fails to find money, Evel picks up more explosives at a mining company warehouse. He returns to finish the job as the police leave, believing someone tried to suicide in the washroom. Evel then blows open the safe he initially sought.

The first sequence in *The Last American Hero* delivers the same message of police incompetence. Almost trapped by the feds, Junior escapes through a combination of daring and skill by executing a "bootleg turn"—a high speed 180 degree turn on a one lane road. Another time Junior is warned of a roadblock ahead on his police band radio. He sounds a siren and shows a red flasher, which the police take for one of their own. To the embarrassment of the agents, with the roadblock opened, Junior's whiskey-running Mustang roars through. However his glory is short-lived since the feds proceed to find the family still and smash it and jail Junior's father.

Living with danger through skill and "drive" is important for both heroes because the alternative is deadening work. Earning a living in routine ways is portrayed as mechanical and alienating. Evel promises his future wife adventure and travel—both impossible if they stay in their Montana home town. In *The Last American Hero* Junior maintains his father's prime value—independence. During a crucial home scene, Junior and his brother talk. Wayne says that a neighbor is willing to take Junior on as an apprentice garage mechanic at \$2.10 an hour. Junior scorns the idea: apprenticeship is absurd for him, for he has already built his own racer, and besides, he argues, no garage mechanic will ever have his name in the newspaper except for his obituary.



In a flashback to his youth, voice over Evel explains he grew up in Butte Montana, a mining town honeycombed with shafts that could collapse. We see a young boy walking in a forlorn area, playing with a yoyo. A car comes up and honks at him to move. The auto then collapses into a hole that opens. The sight gag and the laconic voice over clues the film's ironic stance to the whole story.



Demonstrating his talent for showmanship, in a flashback episode Evel gets a crowd at a bar to buy him drinks while he builds anticipation for “something big” that’s going to happen. He leads the crowd to a store closed for the night, breaks in and emerges saying there’s a thief inside. A police arrives and Evel offers to re-enter if given a gun. He then proceeds to shoot open the safe and while the cop chases after the imaginary crook, Evel hands out cash to his audience.

Following this scene Junior visits his jailed father, who counsels that merely for the money, racing is too dangerous. The son confesses that it is more than that, and paternal wisdom confirms the young man’s decision to race.

Father: “Your mother is always after me to get out of the whiskey business. You was too young to remember, but after my first time in the pen, to please her I hired on at the sawmill. (Soundtrack unclear) ... permission to go to the can. Pretty much like here. It didn't seem to worry most of the boys. They put in their time, lookin’ ahead to payday, but not me. That paycheck wasn't money, it was a bill of sale. Three months of that ... back to whiskey. It’s hard on your ma. But damn foolishness to one person is breath of life to another.”

The Last American Hero and *Evel Knievel* depict living with danger through skill as an emblem of independence in a society that demands acquiescence to authority and which offers alienating and deadening work. In terms of the films’ audiences this is appealing because it offers a daydream response to the real problem of the nature of work in advanced industrial capitalism. It is neither a realistic nor a desirable solution to problems in the audience’s life but a fantasy displacement. Obviously this produces a strong element of ambiguity within the films. They recognize a genuine working class problem, but they postulate only a defensive individual escape, rather than a direct social and political solution.

Authority and the system

The attitude to authority and the social system in both films follows a similar pattern: acknowledging a genuine problem, but proposing an ambiguous solution. In both films the protagonists come to knowledge as they learn how to bargain with and outwit authority figures so as to establish themselves in the best possible position within the system. They learn to what degree authority can be challenged. For Evel Knievel, although the police embody authority and their antagonism to him is a long-established fact, they are basically good-natured stupid buffoons, not truly malicious villains. Similarly, in Evel’s successful “present,” his doctor also serves as a buffoon villain. Evel sees the MD’s insistence that he rest to repair his broken bones as a conspiracy to keep him from jumping. In *The Last American Hero* we see police idiocy in a farcical episode in which Junior is using a small fuel oil truck to transport whiskey. Pursued by a trooper, he finally has to slow down and he opens a valve that dumps the load onto the highway. The policeman, a visual stereotype of the fat Southern state trooper, demonstrates the alcoholic content of Junior’s load by lighting a match to the liquid which stains a mile of highway. Looking back at the burning trail, Junior can smugly point out that the evidence is now destroyed.

More seriously, in *The Last American Hero* Junior learns that he has to fight the system with money when he faces the fact that the criminal justice system is essentially corrupt. After the jailing of his father, Junior brings a lawyer to the jail. Here Junior learns about the justice system when the lawyer explains that the sentence will only be six months if the father is contrite and promises to renounce illegal whiskey making. When the prisoner objects, the following dialogue takes place.

Lawyer: “Elroy, Elroy, now I drink your whiskey....boys in the courthouse drink it. Wouldn't be surprised if His Honor had a jar or two tucked away somewhere, but that has no bearing...”

Father: “The hell it don't! City Hall’s so full of crooks they're falling out of the windows! Country club boys with their payoffs and kickbacks... Where do you go to find a little justice?”

Lawyer: “Depends on what you can afford.”

The lawyer explains his fee and “extras” (that is, bribes) which guarantee better prison treatment, and advises Junior, “It’s kind of like justice, son. You get what you pay for.” The need for ready cash to pay for the “extras” motivates Junior’s first attempts at racing.



Cross cutting between Evel's anxiety before the schedule big jump at Ontario and his memory of his first professional daredevil jump, Evel recalls how an older veteran bull rider at a rodeo gave him encouragement. But just before Evel's jump the cowboy was killed when thrown by the bull. Evel saw the promoter lie to the crowd about the death.



Continuing to demonstrate his mixed emotions, Evel expresses his pride in his valor and his concern about injury while his wife tends to him. Several visual gags occur here, as he asks his wife (Sue Lyon) for a dressing for a wound on his leg while he waves the dressing around. Though probably no longer workable as a gag, the dressing is visually identical to what at the time (early 1970s) would have been easily recognizable as a conventional menstrual pad which actually has a blood stain on it. His dedicated but cynical surgeon shows up and pours alcohol on the wound to call Evel's bluff bravado about not fearing pain.

Junior and Evel both have crucial formative experiences through confrontations with entrepreneurs. In both cases the lesson learned is never accept the boss's terms but bargain for your own. Evel's first jump for pay comes at a small rodeo show run by a red-nosed, bumptious promoter who recounts his distinguished past which includes running the largest reptile garden in the Southwest. Evel's native wit gets him his job—jumping two pickup trucks placed end to end—and he successfully haggles from \$50 if he's successful and \$25 if he's not, to \$50 win or lose. Just before Evel's stunt, the promoter's callousness is revealed when a veteran cowboy who befriended Evel is killed in the Brahma bull riding event. When the promoter covers up the death, Evel completes his jump and leaves in anger, aware that his own potential death or injury would be treated in exactly the same way by the rodeo boss. The rest of the picture implies that Evel operates as a free professional since the financial arrangements and bookings are never mentioned. (Actually, Evel Knievel was sponsored by Harley Davidson, the motorcycle company, and Olympia Beer, and was promoted by a sports PR firm.)

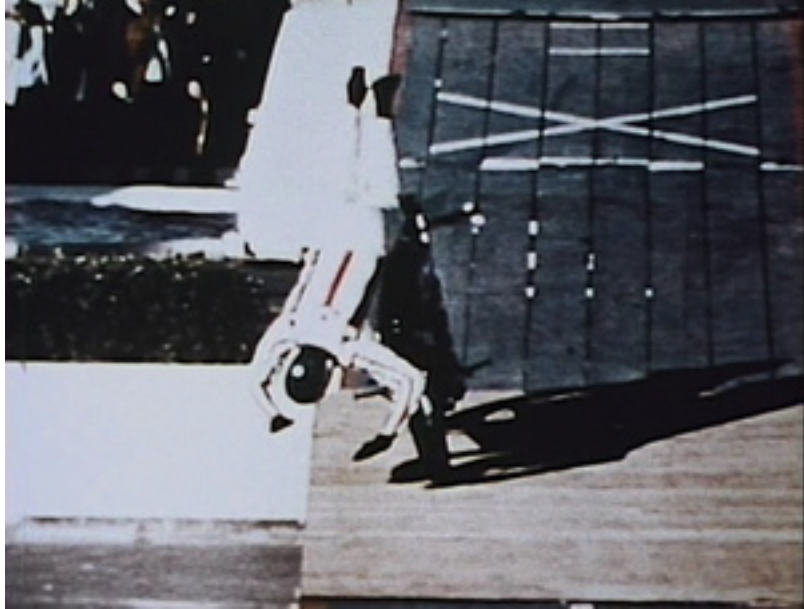
Junior's first encounter with a businessman is similar to Evel's. In the face of Junior's persistence, the owner-operator of a small dirt track relents and allows Junior to enter a demolition derby. After the event, Junior insists on moving up to racing, and is successful through persistence, but finally his independence gets to be too much for the track operator and Junior is barred from further racing there. The young man's response is to move up to the true professional circuit. Here he is aided by Marge, who gives him a rule book which proves his eligibility and a track pass which lets him see the owner of the large track at Hickory, N. C. Again Junior has to talk his way into starting. To this point the young racer is shown as an expert self-promoter. But Junior soon comes into a conflict that his cockiness cannot overcome. Junior instinctively dislikes racing team owner Burton Colt when he sees how Colt constantly harasses his drivers. Forced to drop out of the race because of car trouble, Junior is approached by Colt, who is looking for a new driver. Colt says to Junior, "You got the talent, but I got the bankroll."

Junior scorns the offer, saying he will make it on his talent, but Colt is unruffled, "Dream on, boy, dream on." Junior's dreams are ended when he is finally faced with the economic reality that he can no longer subsidize his racing through whiskey making. He returns to Colt and strikes a bargain, becoming the "hired jockey" he had previously scorned. Junior's talent gives him his only edge, his chance to throw away the one-way radio Colt uses to direct his drivers and to bargain with Colt for a bigger share of the winnings and his own pit crew. The tenuousness of the arrangement, its distastefulness to Junior, and its inevitability is made clear in the film.

In both the cases of Junior and Evel, skill and achievement are portrayed as one's only bargaining tool for more money and better working conditions. For employees it is the only source of leverage and freedom within the situation. Thus while the system, the police, and entrepreneurs are all pictured as corrupt, foolish, or exploitative, the only way out posited is individual chutzpa and skill.

Role of women

The Last American Hero and *Evel Knievel* both devote considerable time to their heroes' pursuit of their heroines. But the role of women in both is much more than a simple "love interest." Evel's courtship of Linda (Sue Lyon) expresses themes of his general character development: his persistence, aggressiveness, and victory over institutions. The sequences of their courtship are set in the context of school. Evel motorcycles past Linda on her way to school, makes her drop her books and then dares her to ride with him on the cycle, despite her suspicion of him as a "hood." While with her, Evel's show-off ways quickly lead to a police chase. In the next courtship sequence Evel stands outside a high school dance looking in. As a dropout he is excluded, and his cycle, like the cowboy's faithful horse, provides his consolation. Later, as Linda is ice-skating with school girlfriends, Evel arrives. Ever showing off, Evel does some fancy skating turns, and then tricks Linda into his car by giving her the keys (so nothing can happen). He then hotwires the car and drives off with her. The sequence ends with a long



A montage sequence of early home movie films shows Evel's early career in motorcycle races, hill climbing contests, and daredevil stunts. The documents end with slow motion footage from several angles of his famous jump at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas which ended in flying over the cars but a rough landing in which he was tossed end over end suffering many broken bones.



In another flashback Evel's courtship of his future wife continues demonstrating his macho outsider stance. When she says she's leaving town and going to college, high school dropout Evel shoots basketball while asserting that he "don't need no stinking letterman's sweater," to know he's a man, a top notch athlete, etc.



Refused entry at his girlfriend's college house,

shot of the car parked in snowy woods and the implication that they have further physical romance. Later Linda finds Evel in the high school gym, practicing basketball. Evel carries on with his typical bravado—"I don't need a stinkin' letterman sweater to know I'm a hero." Linda informs him, "I'm going to college. I want an education. I don't want to be a waitress at the Mountain Inn and spend the rest of my life here."

Evel's subsequent abduction of Linda from her college residence is visually one of the film's better moments. Denied entrance by the housemother because it is late, he drives his cycle up the long front steps, knocking down the door, and roars up a spiral staircase to Linda's room. The film implies that Evel's successful wresting of Linda from education as an institution and into his vagabond life satisfies her urge not to be a waitress in a small Rocky Mountain town. Yet Linda's only role as Mrs. Knievel is to encourage her husband, to worry about his health and safety, reassure him, and keep his scrapbook up to date. The message, though certainly stereotyped, fits the frequent pattern of working class women moving directly from parental family (extended in this case to college as an in loco parentis institution) to marriage. Linda realistically assesses her future in Butte, and her uncomplaining acceptance of a traditional marital role is clearly shown as her alternative to waitressing or school.

While Linda is defined throughout in terms of her relation to Evel, Marge Denison (Valerie Perrine) in *The Last American Hero* is her own person. When we and Junior first meet her she is considerably more experienced than the young man. Marge functions in the film as Junior's double. She has gone from rural/small town Southern upbringing to urban life. Along the way she has learned that the price of success is compromise, a lesson she tries to tell Junior, who of course must learn it himself. Her initial stance toward Junior is to help him in a rather sisterly way: providing the rule book and track pass to enter big time racing. As secretary to the track manager she also gets Junior a special rate at the drivers' motel and informs him of a free "boo-fay" dinner. Junior reciprocates by inviting Marge, but she has a date, so he sends her flowers. When Marge finds she's been stood up she aggressively seeks out Junior and goes to the buffet with him. There Junior finds Marge is both popular and well-known among the drivers. Since she says she has "tons of work to do" he takes her home early, and later phones her ... but a sleepy Kyle Kingman answers the phone.

The next sequence with Marge begins with her escorted by Kyle, the race's winner. However Kyle's wife unexpectedly arrives. Sending her husband off to get her a drink ("What good's a husband who can't service his wife?"), she puts Marge down as a racing circuit groupie and gives some gratuitous advice: "Take a tip from me, Sugar: if you can't sell it, sit on it." Junior takes Marge home and in the process of consoling each other's loss, physically and emotionally, Marge relates her past. She was a fat teenager and her mother sent her to business school in Atlanta. There she was once invited to a college fraternity party ("Now nobody on the face of God's green earth thinks he's smarter than those fraternity boys"), which turned out to be a "pig party." Her date received a prize for bringing the second ugliest woman. Marge goes on, "Oh, I cried for a couple of weeks and I got comical calls in the middle of the night—there's a lot of jokers in Atlanta—and I left about a month later." Junior's response is to affirm that Marge is the most beautiful woman he's ever known. But the relationship, though sealed physically, remains undefined. When Junior wins his first big race, Marge is off with another racer, explaining that she has many friends and Junior still is one of them.

Marge has found the independence within her situation that Junior seeks too. He attains it through his exceptional driving skill, while she uses her secretarial skills at the tracks on the seasonal circuit and her sexual and personal attractiveness. And from her actions it is clear that the future relation of the two must be on terms of equality. Both Junior and Marge have made the best of the situation in which they find themselves.

The portraits of these two women have a certain general class accuracy. For neither woman is the emotional quality of the relationship the primary factor in

Evel uses his cycle to break down the door, rides up a stair case and gets her to run off with him. The action gag highlights his impulsive swagger and breaking of conventional behavior.



As the big finale approaches, the attempt to jump over 19 cars, at Ontario, Evel stands for the national anthem, surrounded by U.S. flags. The actual jump took place February 28, 1971.



Following the entire film as a build up, the climax arrives when Evel jumps his bike over the row of cars in slow motion shot from many angles, with the crowd's close attention, and celebration when he finishes successfully.



their actions. This attitude, formed both from working class realities and the socialization of adolescent women, differs markedly from the general attitude of middle class women, who place emotional quality first in priorities. (See Mirra Komarovsky, *Blue-Collar Marriage*, and Lee Rainwater, et. al., *Workingman's Wife*, which are virtually the only two lengthy studies of working class women's attitudes.)

Class portrayal

Neither Evel Knievel nor Junior move distinctly into the middle class, except as measured by income. Junior maintains his Appalachian roots and is distinguished from other drivers by his more conservative dress and demeanor. Before the big race which concludes the film, Junior joins in a pre-race prayer while other drivers are seen ignoring the spiritual message booming over the track p.a. system. Junior's authenticity is virtually swallowed up in the racing world, just as during the national anthem the U.S. flag is almost squeezed out by product flags for Champion spark plugs, Coke, etc. Although the final shots of the film indicate that Junior cannot go back home, the film also indicates approvingly that he will not join the fast-living crowd of the other drivers. In *Evel Knievel* the hero who attained his position by scorning the institutions of law and education is glorified as the man who will never rest on his past achievements or play it safe, but who will always continue his allegiance to his inner code of daring and his respect for "his" audiences, who are clearly Middle Americans.

Both pictures, however, distort their real life subjects in significant ways. *The Last American Hero* is loosely based on Tom Wolfe's essay of the same name, reprinted in Wolfe's *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*. The journalist describes Junior Johnson as a hero to the Southern white working class. But Wolfe adds some background which the film's scriptwriters have discarded. Junior Johnson grossed \$100, 000 in the 1963 racing season and is the owner of his own chicken farm (42,000 birds) and a road grading enterprise in his home county, and Junior had actually served time in a Federal prison for his whiskey activities. More significantly, Wolfe puts Junior in a more distinct class position by describing the moonshining of whiskey as having an economic basis that goes back to the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion of western Pennsylvania farmers against the encroachment of federal authority representing urban and eastern seaboard interests. Wolfe also clearly outlines the domination of racing by Detroit automakers; the Burton Colts do not even exist in the real world of stock car racing. Wolfe puts Junior's reputation into a distinct class and regional framework: Junior, man and myth, is rooted in the values of the rural Southern white working class. In the film, in contrast to the essay, Junior's appeal is more generalized.

While the real Junior Johnson is actually more generalized as Junior Jackson (film name), the screen Evel Knievel is narrower than the image of the public performer. The live Evel in the mid 1970s was given to moralistic platitudes which match his patriotic suit and cycle. His official publicity described him as a high school sports star, a family man (children are not mentioned in the film), a rugged individual, and downplays his early scrapes with the police. In public Evel sometimes scorned the film (though a 16mm print was usually shown at the motor sports shows where he performed). And the picture is not entirely complimentary: it indicates he is abnormally neurotic, an egomaniac at least, fearful of his audience, and his personal integrity is challenged—none of which, presumably, the real Evel would appreciate being said. In his subsequent career Evel became a popular icon, even gaining a contract for toys bearing his name and likeness, until he physically assaulted a fellow in public using a baseball bat. (Details of his early career and subsequent fall are found on his Wikipedia entry.)

Whatever the truth about the real figures, within both films the two antagonists are portrayed as heroic representatives of their class. Junior's personal integrity is unchallenged and in *Evel Knievel* the point is made following Evel's spectacularly photographed four-and-one-half minute slow motion jump over 19 cars. In a shot

After again spinning his yarn about his dream to jump the Grand Canyon, the camera shifts to a presumably subjective shot with Evel's POV as he rides to the Canyon rim, and the film continues with a flythrough shot over the vast space. Credit roll.

from a plane forward and above we see him riding in open Western country and hear a voice over monologue. Though phrased with some of the consistent self-mocking we have seen throughout, by camera attention on Evel and its placement at the end of the film, this monologue has to be seen as a significant statement of the film's theme.

“....Celebrities like myself, Elvis, Frank Sinatra, John Wayne... we have a responsibility. There are many good people who look at our lives and it gives theirs some meaning. They come out from their jobs—most of which are meaningless to them—and they watch me jump 20 cars and maybe get splattered. It means something to them. They jump right alongside of me. They take the handlebars in their hands and for one split second they're all daredevils. I am the last gladiator in the new Rome. I go into the arena and compete against destruction and I win. And next week I go out there and I do it again. And this time, civilization being what it is and all, we have very little choice about our life. The only thing really left us is a choice about our death. And mine will be... glorious!”

(Visual: cut to camera over handlebars looking down the road. Cut: camera moving down road, then out over the Grand Canyon. Freeze with credit roll.)

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The action theme

As in any success story film, both movies picture the obstacles in the way of success. What is particularly interesting in both *Evel Knievel* and *The Last American Hero* is not the use of barriers to retard the dramatic action but the consistent depiction of direct action as the solution to all problems facing the hero. Evel and Junior constantly maintain their desire to win and express that desire in direct, immediate action. Thus any problem Evel faces—whether he is being chased for a traffic violation or wants to be alone with Linda or must overcome his ambivalence and touchiness about risking his life—he solves through action: he attempts to outrun the police, hotwires the car, makes his jump. In *The Last American Hero* the same pattern is re-enforced by shock cuts which answer the problem posed in the preceding sequence. Will Junior get to drive in the demolition derby? There is a shock cut to a sledge hammer going through a car windshield—yes, he is preparing a car for the event.

Basically the action theme in both films posits the impossible. The underlying assumption is that the hero's impulse is right, that introspection is bad and action is good. However, the depiction of the hero's unhampered drive to the top is at distinct variance with the audience's reality. In fact, simply acting, playing out the "little-engine-that-could" theory of advancement, without considering the factors external to one's will is not a sufficient guide to individual advancement.

The depiction of the action theme and its appeal to a working class audience must be seen in light of its middle class inverse. To grossly generalize, we can distinguish two stages of bourgeois ideology dealing with success:

- The naive success myth in which adherence to certain code virtues such as postponement of gratification, respect for authority, hard work, ambition, etc., is shown to lead invariably to success (money, power, esteem, etc.).
- The sophisticated or ironic success myth in which the price of material success is shown to be spiritual and social emptiness. We could call this the bourgeois failure myth, or the sour-grapes version of the naive success myth.

The second stage or version is actually dominant at present, and while the ironic version of the success myth was historically the intelligentsia's defense of their marginal position under capitalism, it has been generalized into a tool of ideological repression of the lower middle class and working class. Its dominance in modern U.S. thought is precisely why *Citizen Kane* and *Death of a Salesman* are so quintessentially "American."

This sour-grapes version is basically unsatisfactory for its audience because it can only be pessimistic. Disagreement with this version of the myth is a component of the common person's complaint of too much sex and violence on the screen; an earlier version of this expression of disagreement was the frequent complaint that "serious" films were not "uplifting"—i.e., optimistic about humans. Part of the appeal of *The Last American Hero* and *Evel Knievel* lies in the fact that they do indeed react against the failure myth. However, being made within the Hollywood system, they rest on a basic lie—that success is possible for the working class through internal virtue pursued by an individual route. These two films reject the excessive attention to the consequences of action found in the failure myth—an attention that leads to despair, cynicism, and inaction. In contrast to the anguished modern anti-hero, these films propose, through their primary focus on

means rather than consequences, heroes who represent a healthy reaction against the interior self examination proposed by bourgeois ideology. They indicate that the hero's problems are not basically subjective and psychological and they reject circular examination of self. The portrait of Marge, for example, makes a distinct break with the tradition that women must examine and question their motives and the future consequences of their actions, or that they must pay if they resolve their problems through action not preceded by agonizing reflection.

These two films can be seen as more “sophisticated” than one might initially expect. Evel is compulsive in creating his own myth from everything at hand, in proclaiming himself a hero while covering the traces of his self-promotion. This gives the picture a certain ironic tone in which one is never quite sure of what is being presented. Is it a straight story, or a straight story overlaid with the director's eye exposing Evel's own comic and amusing neurosis? Actually it is even more complicated: a straight story that includes Evel's self-parody as he promotes himself to hero status for his own gain. The film says that if you have to hustle for a living you might as well be egomaniacal and megalomaniacal about it. One could never, within the context of the film, begrudge Evel his attitude and actions. Thus Evel's self-inflated comparisons of himself with Elvis Presley and John Wayne are not merely laughable, but wry.

At this point in considering these films we can see that they are appealing to a working class audience in their rejection of the failure myth. But at the same time, in the terms of that rejection, by adhering to the idea that success is possible within the present system and that success is individual, the films remain within the prescribed limits of bourgeois ideology. If one pursues the success myth and then fails, one can only blame oneself. As Chinoy comments:

“To the extent that workers focus blame for their failure to rise above the level of wage labor upon themselves rather than upon the institutions that govern the pursuit of wealth or upon the persons who control those institutions, U.S. society escapes the consequences of its own contradictions.”

In order to get a better perspective on the relation of the success/ failure myth to film, a further consideration of the Hollywood film audience is in order.

Hollywood's audiences and critics

While auteur criticism provided a valuable corrective to the previously dominant snobbish dismissal of Hollywood film, auteurism, has promoted a confused view of the Hollywood audience. A ready example of this is provided by an excerpt from a self-promotional statement by a new film journal:

“*The Journal of Popular Film* does not ignore the unalterable fact that the box-office, the U.S. public, has determined the developmental thrust of its films.”

The motivation behind a journal of popular film is a healthy reaction against the elitist high-culture notion that the mass audience has an inherent mediocrity (at best) in its taste and intellectual capacity, and that a film's popularity proves its aesthetic inferiority. Yet the defense of popular culture, as presented above, repeats a basic high-culture assumption: that consumers determine the products and services they consume. (Or, as the highbrow critic puts it: the lowbrow public gets the crap it deserves.) Of course the idea of consumer determination is widely promoted by merchants of all types of goods and services: celebrating a democracy of taste (“consumers are free to choose”), they justify a low level product. The only conclusion that can be drawn from following this deteriorated line of reasoning is that the majority of people are childish in their selection of art and entertainment.

It is curious that film criticism persists in following such a weak line of thought in the face of the widely-publicized “consumer revolt” of the last few years. At the

same time that it has become household wisdom that U.S. consumers do not have safe and environmentally adequate (much less reliable and economical) automobiles, nutritious food, safe and inexpensive pharmaceuticals, etc., film criticism has taken little notice of the reason for poor quality consumer goods and services—the capitalist system—nor has it applied a critique based on this understanding to its own object of study: the consumption of film entertainment.

The unexamined “unalterable fact” that “the U.S. public has determined the developmental thrust of its films” turns out to be, on modest consideration not a fact at all but an opinionated wish and a false one. Run-of-the-mill mainstream U.S. sociology has long ago documented the commonsense observation that choice in consumption is determined principally by the external condition of availability and secondarily by the subjective condition of sensibility, which rests on the cultural atmosphere and training before the age of consent. (For a concise essay on the subject, see C. Wright Mills’ “The Cultural Apparatus” in his *Power, Politics and People*.) Any statement about U.S. film audiences which assumes a free market economy and consumer free will and free choice as false as a lemonade stand analogy to explain contemporary capitalism.

Another frequently unexamined idea about the film-audience relationship is that movies mirror their audience. This is often qualified by the notice that the image is distorted. However films are not distorting mirrors, for a distorting mirror exaggerates a whole. Rather they are selective mirrors which do not usually serve as overt indoctrination (as in jingoistic war films). Films also state covertly through selection. Thus we must ask of any film not merely what is presented but also what is left out, particularly in key areas such as class, race, and sex. We can say, shifting to Bazin’s metaphor, that films are a window on the world, only if we also say that the film almost always opens on a vista that is dominated by upper middle class white heterosexual males who accept the prevailing orthodoxies even when the film is about how miserable they are in such a situation.

While investigating a working class community, Herbert J. Gans found that its members tend to select what is self-confirming or culturally self-validating when given images in the mass media (reported in Gans, *The Urban Villagers*). In the context of my argument, it would seem that the working class attitude to the hero is a combination of romantic acceptance and a pre-set cynicism that discounts exaggeration. From this point of view, the ironic stance inherent in *Evel Knievel* and *The Last American Hero* would not interrupt audience response but actually mesh with it. Junior and Evel are accepted as heroes, but since their portrayal is qualified through irony, the audience can accept this too, as an internal debunking of sorts. In a parallel case, Shostak argues that the popularity of expose journalism among the working class (e.g., the old *Confidential* and the current *National Enquirer*) can be attributed to in part to a desire to put celebrities in their place. The typical newspaper sports page exhibits this tendency, for over a period of time it both builds the heroism of an athlete and exposes his Achilles heel of hot temper, egotism, excessive partying in season, etc.. Precisely because of their directors’ ironic stance to their heroes, neither *Evel Knievel* (dir. Marvin Chomsky) nor *The Last American Hero* (dir. Lamont Johnson) can be interrogated for clear answers to the social problems they raise.

Just as the working class film audience selects what is self-validating the media, so too does the middle class. A striking example is provided by Robert Warshow’s classic essay, “The Gangster as Tragic Hero,” which describes the comforting nature of the failure myth as presented in the gangster film. On a close reading, Warshow’s analysis far better describes the appeal of the gangster film to the liberal middle class intellectual (the essay was first published in the *Partisan Review*) than to anyone else.

Within the Hollywood film about the only healthy look at the success and failure dynamic in a social perspective including class terms is found in Preston Sturges’ comedies, perhaps because Sturges himself had so thoroughly internalized the contradictions of success and failure. What is most revealing about Hollywood success/failure films is what they do not show. First, they ignore the absence of

opportunity and its root source in the very nature of capitalist social organization. Even in those rare cases when a film does depict absence of opportunity, as in *The Roaring Twenties* where returning veterans from WWI face unemployment and therefore turn to crime, the remainder of the film's message is Warshaw's "comforting failure."

The second omission is the feasibility of group action and the possibility of defining success as not merely rising above one's fellows but rising with them. The closest Hollywood generally comes to any depiction of group achievement is always with an in extremis situation: the stranded platoon, the sinking ship, the lifeboat, etc. (Such films usually present some variant of the theory of "natural selection" since most of the group dies by the end.) Interestingly enough, such films are also generally the only ones which explicitly deal with class differences as a theme. The exception that proves the rule are the Hollywood films of European directors such as Lang, Renoir, and Lubitsch.

In this context, *The Last American Hero* offers an interesting comparison with the "quintessentially and self-consciously Hawksian" (Sarris) *Red Line—7000* which treats auto racing with a studied indifference to the drivers' class backgrounds. When we talk about the film audience we always mean an aggregate of various audiences which can be described by distinguishing their nationality, language, sex, class, race, religion, age, occupation, political views, etc. In other words, there is never a homogeneous audience for a Hollywood film. To say this is not to argue for a nominalism claiming every individual's response is totally unique. Obviously some degree of generalization is necessary for critical thought. Recognizing many "audiences" lets us avoid the error of overgeneralization in using such terms as "the American film-viewing public" or the "universal appeal of director X" or "America's sex symbol" without further specification. To generalize the audience actually reveals the most chauvinistic ethnocentricity — elevating the reviewer's/critic's own sex, class, race, and other attributes to the level of the universal.

The challenge of changing the cinema demands a deep probing of several areas by film students and film makers. A radical cinema must consider exactly who the audience is for a film and face up to variety within that audience. It must also consider the audience's tendency both to accept and reject parts of the film on the basis of what it finds self-validating. That means that new ways of overcoming such acceptance and rejection must be found to deliver a radical message. Finally, film alone does not change consciousness. We must directly link the struggle to change consciousness with the struggle to change the external conditions of the audience's life.

Afterthoughts: 2017

With the passage of time, in returning to the films and the essay decades later, I was struck by several things. One was the absence of African Americans or other people of color from the films: something that would be unlikely to happen in Hollywood films made today because of changes in casting politics and marketing strategies. Minimally, we'd now be likely to get a token representation at least. Another was that in retrospect both heroes' lives were vastly simplified for these plots: amply demonstrated on their Wikipedia entries.

The real Evel Knievel actually was a very inventive hustler and athlete, with children, at the time of the big climactic jump shown in the film. He dropped out of high school to work in the mines, was a regional champion ski jumper, served in the U.S. Army, started a semi-pro ice hockey team, ran a hunting guide service (based in poaching on government land in Yellowstone National Park), sold insurance, and ran a Honda motorcycle dealership. All before his daredevil stunt career took off. His career derailed badly several years after the film came out. He'd attained considerable celebrity and had a lucrative deal with Ideal Toys using his image. But he also acquired a rumored reputation for hard drinking, gambling, extramarital sex, and explosive violence. This came to a head when he went after a critic by hitting him with a baseball bat in a public space with many

witnesses.

We now know that the script for *Evel Knievel* was actually written from scratch by screenwriter/director John Milius (there's a great article on him in JUMP CUT 57).

“Milius says Knievel ‘saw himself as the new gladiator of the new Rome, something larger than a daredevil. He saw the whole spectacle of civilization and the absurdity of what it's turned into, and he fit into that’.”

George Hamilton, both producer and star, reported:

“Milius made me read the script to Evel. I realized he was kind of a sociopath and was totally messed. Then all of sudden Evel started to adopt lines out of the movie for himself. So his persona in the movie became more of his persona in real life. He would have been every kid's hero on one hand, but then he went and took that baseball bat and broke that guy's legs and that finished his career in the toy business. Evel was very, very difficult and he was jealous of anybody that was gonna play him.” (Wiki)

In a similar simplification vein, the real Junior Johnson's career flourished in the mid 1950s to the mid 1960s with one year out when he was jailed for running an illegal whiskey still. Updating the depicted racing to c. 1970 obviously saved money since recent races could be cut into the staged action. He was the first to exploit “slipstreaming” in auto racing: getting an advantage by holding close behind a faster car until the last laps. Johnson did go on to be a racing team owner and headed several business enterprises, including fried pork rind snacks.

But beyond these curious facts, this essay has some current resonance due to the sudden flurry of attention to the white working class in the US. Following Donald Trump's surprising success as a politician, writers, thinkers, and politicians reconsidered “fly over country.” What used to be called Middle America now seemed to be a player again in politics. So now we see on the liberal side antagonistic debates about future Democratic Party politics, and on the right a surge in alt-right public events, especially for populism, thinly veiled white supremacy, and anti-immigration nationalism.

At least everyone on the progressive side now seems to admit that the working class in general has been ignored, although the response remains for now a mishmash of concerns: the opioid epidemic, rural poverty, the decline of manufacturing and family wage union jobs, the loss of stature, regionalism, resentment by those who feel deserted, left behind, dismissed, and ignored. But this last point, resentment, is significantly, manipulated by Trump and others and focused especially on race, to mobilize whites to reverse what was advanced in the Obama era, and on a particular partial analysis of class. Rather than simply stated economic inequality, the Right has often successfully framed it as embodied in “the Washington swamp,” and “Wall Street”—both easily linked to the Clintons and the Bushs, as well as moderate establishment Republicans. With a slight of hand, Trump, Tillerson, Mnuchin and company display as somehow not part of the 1%.

What is new is the large scale open expression of grievance by whites, especially referencing the white male working class. It also has to be admitted that for all the concern with social justice issues and identity politics, the otherwise sophisticated use of “intersectionality”—the explicit founding of analysis in gender, racial/ethnic/national identity, and class—has often failed to thoroughly and rigorously consider class. The national sea change brings class back to being a central issue.

In terms of media, art, and cultural analysis, it's still worthwhile to ask the basic questions I was concerned with here. Given that popular culture at a minimum appeals to ordinary folks, how do we understand that in terms of commercial

mass media? What is the appeal? And understanding that, how can radical media makers use that in their own creative work?

A second point worth new consideration: the success story remains a fundamental narrative trajectory in U.S. popular story telling. As such it deserves ongoing scrutiny. Hollywood has often found success with underdog stories. Sometimes groups of strivers (*Breaking Away*, *Dallas Buyers Club*), often comic lovable losers (*Animal House*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, *Ghostbusters 1* and *2*). Positive uplift biopics celebrate heroes: *42*, *Race*, *Sully*, *Milk*. And there's always the underdog fictional hero: perhaps most famously *Rocky*, but in the same pattern *Die Hard* and dozens of other "against all odds" efforts. One interesting turn that could use more analysis: the relatively new extended documentary genre of celebrity musicians such as *Michael Jackson, Journey from Motown to Off the Wall* and *What Happened, Miss Simone?* as well as in-depth looks at backup musicians such as *The Wrecking Crew* and *20 Feet from Stardom*.

But the inherent nature of defining success in a capitalist economy and culture in terms of individualism and monetary wealth makes the ironic version of the success myth the most durable narrative, almost obsessively returned to, stirring the ashes, looking for answers in the bones. That can be harsh (such as Oliver Stone's *Nixon*), or mild (*The Founder*, with Michaels Keaton's cheery version of Ray Kroc's building the McDonald's empire). But it can be endlessly twisted, as with as with the serial changes of *The Wire*, *The Sopranos*, or *Mad Men*, or *Breaking Bad* or the dark visions of (comic) *The Wolf of Wall Street* or (serious) *There Will Be Blood*. Our current moment, the Trump Era, has already produced many new versions of the archetypes of ironic success. If we survive, there will be lots of tales to tell. In the meantime, we can use our own twists our own ingenuity and political smarts to get the truth out in the open.

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